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SUBJECT: BURMA'S GENERALS: STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Larry Dinger for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

¶1. (S) As the review of U.S. policy regarding Burma continues amid signs that the military regime wants to engage with Washington, we offer some thoughts about the senior generals, what motivates them, what they might want from engagement, and what the U.S. might place on the table. Burma's military machine is top-down, xenophobic and utterly focused on preserving national unity. At the same time, senior generals are embarrassed by their international pariah status and crave respect. Some are concerned with Burma's ever-growing dependence on China and its geostrategic location amidst historical foes. Others, having seen a glimpse of the international community's benevolence following Nargis, no doubt wish for a lifting of sanctions and economic assistance. No matter the motivations, a dialogue with Burma's senior military leaders will be slow, frustrating, and, within the U.S., politically charged. While dialogue is unlikely to yield major, near-term political outcomes such as changes to the constitution, it might sow seeds for future change by illustrating to the next line of leaders what an improved relationship with the U.S. could look like. Above all, a dialogue could lead to tangible benefits for Burma's long-suffering people, a worthwhile goal in itself. End summary.

How do they think?

¶2. (S) All major decisions in Burma are made at the very top. Senior general Than Shwe, Vice Senior General Maung Aye, and their inner circles call the shots. Than Shwe's dominant personality is keenly felt. Subordinates appear to share only good news, leaving the senior generals potentially ignorant of many realities. In this information vacuum, the generals continue to pursue their "roadmap to democracy" and ruinous, top-down economic policies. While self interest clearly is a factor in their thinking, it would be a mistake to think they are motivated exclusively by self-enrichment. These are true believers who are convinced they are divinely entrusted in the tradition of the Burmese "warrior kings" with doing what is best for the country and the people. They feel they are simply misunderstood by the outside world.

¶3. (S) These are career military men, most with combat experience in Burma's past internal conflicts, who value the unity and stability of the state as a top priority. The senior generals assert, and seem genuinely to believe, that the military is the only guarantor of that unity and stability. Thus, they see a dominant role for the armed forces in governance to be essential. The senior generals inculcate this military ethos, indoctrinating new cadets to be "the triumphant elite of the future."

¶4. (S) Since only very senior career military men make real decisions, such men would need to participate in any serious

engagement effort with the civilian-led U.S. The Burmese military would be far more comfortable at the table in a mil/mil environment, their comfort zone.

¶15. (S) The generals see themselves as devout Buddhists. State media have recently inundated the public with scenes of senior generals and their families consecrating the newly-constructed Uppatasanti Pagoda in Nay Pyi Taw, a replica of Rangoon's legendary Shwedagon Pagoda. Of course, such acts of Buddhist merit-making have a public relations aspect, but they also do reflect a philosophical base.

¶16. (S) Families matter. The senior generals spoil their children and grandchildren. They seek to protect their families--some were sent to Dubai in September 2007 to ride out the Saffron Revolution protests and crackdown. The generals also seek to ensure a firm financial footing for their families' futures through lucrative positions at home and bank accounts offshore. The application of our visa bans against the generals' immediate family members irritates.

¶17. (S) Western rationality is not always apparent in regime decision-making. Than Shwe reportedly relies on favored soothsayers. We hear one such seer advised moving the capital to the interior because Rangoon would be subject to street disturbances and a horrific storm. Numerology also factors in. Witness the overnight shift to a currency divisible by nines in 1987 and the release of 9,002 prisoners last September, reportedly to ensure an auspicious 2009. Such decision methods may sound strange to us, but they are everyday elements in the lives of many Burmese.

¶18. (S) The senior generals are xenophobic. They don't seem to understand foreigners and certainly don't trust them, particularly those who challenge their legitimacy. This may be a reason why Than Shwe reportedly abhors Aung San Suu Kyi, who grew up overseas, married a UK citizen and then returned to Burma to challenge the military's authority. Historically, the Burmese have fought wars with all their neighbors, including China, India, and Thailand. While the current regime relies heavily on China for investment, trade and support in international institutions and accepts a degree of Chinese advice as a consequence, it is very unlikely that the senior generals would defer to Chinese (or any outsider's) demands on core issues, particularly on the military's central role in governance.

¶19. (S) The generals are paranoid about the U.S., fear invasion, and have a bunker mentality. Past U.S. rhetoric about regime change sharpened concerns. One rumored explanation for Than Shwe's decision to move the capital to Nay Pyi Taw, far from the coast, was supposedly to protect from a sea-borne invasion force. The regime was truly convinced the U.S. was prepared to invade when a helicopter carrier sailed near Burmese territorial waters for humanitarian purposes after Cyclone Nargis last May.

¶10. (S) Than Shwe and his colleagues view the current period as one chapter in Burma's long history. They profess that democracy requires a guided process of "gradual maturity." They believe the U.S. and the West in general are trying to force democracy on a country that is not yet developed enough to handle it. This is more than a cynical excuse to retain power. They think they know best.

¶11. (S) At the same time, the generals are proud and crave the acceptance of the international community. They hate being subject to sanctions and aspire to be treated with the respect accorded other world leaders, including some authoritarian ones. Interactions with key foreign visitors and Burmese attendance at international fora always make headlines in the government newspaper.

Why might the regime want to talk now?

¶12. (S) Indications are that the senior generals are hoping for a fresh USG approach and are willing to explore

engagement. Even before the U.S. elections, the generals were testing the waters. Last August, they suggested a senior U.S. military official should visit Burma. More recently, they have made clear they want conversations in Washington and have asked to upgrade from Charge d'Affaires to Ambassador for that purpose. They recently suggested narcotics and POW/MIA issues might be useful topics for initial discussion. They provided unusually high access when EAP/MLS Director Blake visited Burma last week. What motivates the desire to talk?

¶13. (S) When the U.S. response to Cyclone Nargis last May was a major humanitarian effort rather than a much-feared invasion, the generals were reportedly surprised and gratified. More broadly, some senior leaders have drawn a lesson from the Nargis response that international humanitarian assistance can be valuable. Some in the military are nervous about an overdependence on China; all recall the difficult history with that looming neighbor. President Obama's engagement theme intrigues. The generals want the international respect that a more normal relationship with the U.S. would bring. They feel a degree of pain, or at least irritation, from sanctions, and want relief. It may be that some neighbors, ASEAN leaders, maybe even the Chinese, are urging the generals to try dialogue.

¶14. (S) Also, it is entirely possible that the most senior generals are looking for an escape strategy. Retirement has never been an option for Burmese leaders. Historically, Burmese kings or generals and those close to them either have died in office, been killed, or been deposed and imprisoned. The current senior generals are getting old, but they have no desire to be held to account for what the outside world perceives as their crimes against the people. Than Shwe reportedly has mentioned to some interlocutors, including Indonesian President Yudoyono, his strong desire not to appear before an international tribunal. All the top generals undoubtedly want assurances that, if they voluntarily step aside, they and their families will retain their assets and will not be prosecuted.

What might the regime propose?

¶15. (S) Senior generals likely perceive that they have already made concessions. They allow foreign embassies and cultural units like the American Center to operate. They have received high-level UN visits, including four thus far in 2009. They have committed to a "roadmap to democracy," drafted a constitution, held a referendum, and announced elections. They have released some political prisoners, including several high-profile ones like Win Tin, though not yet Aung San Suu Kyi.

¶16. (S) We should not expect significant progress on political core issues in the near term. The regime is very unlikely to reverse course on its "democracy" roadmap, to rehash the 1990 elections or to revisit the new constitution. The senior generals will not leave the scene willingly unless they are confident of their own safety and of financial security for themselves and their families.

¶17. (S) Some possible offers:

--The regime might accept some tweaks to the election process; a degree of international observation is reportedly already on offer.

--They might relax some terms of ASSK's current detention.

--They could possibly be persuaded to release some political prisoners in advance of the elections. At a minimum, they might consider resumption of ICRC access to political prisoners.

--The regime would likely seek cooperation on perceived win/win issues like counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, anti-trafficking, economic-policy advice, and disaster-risk

reduction. They likely would relish mil/mil and law enforcement training opportunities.

--There also may be willingness to make concessions on lower-profile issues that affect the operation of our Embassy, such as visas, increased in-country travel permission, and an expansion of our presence to include a re-opening of the former U.S. consulate in Mandalay and/or a USAID mission to oversee humanitarian assistance.

--Symbolic gestures carry much weight with the Burmese. The regime has already signaled it wants to upgrade its COM in Washington from Charge to Ambassador. It aspires for the U.S. to use the country name "Myanmar," not "Burma."

If the U.S. engages, what might we raise and offer?

¶18. (S) Any engagement effort would likely take time, not just one meeting or two, but a series of encounters that, ideally, would gradually build confidence and a willingness on the Burmese side to open up. That is the "Asian way." In the early stages, it would be useful to dispel any regime concern that the U.S. intends to invade or dominate. We should hint that Burma stands to gain from decent relationships with the outside world and that there are alternatives to reliance on China. When leaders change their ways they can have a fruitful relationship with the United States based on shared mutual interests.

-- Still, it would be important up front to reiterate key, long-term themes: the need to release political prisoners, including ASSK, and initiate genuine dialogue.

-- Early on, we should accent shared mutual interests, such as the win/win topics mentioned above: counter-narcotics; trafficking in persons; disaster risk reduction; and remains recovery from WWII, with a note that U.S.-facilitated training in such areas could be possible.

-- The effects of the worldwide economic recession offer opportunities. Burma's economy is suffering. Positive political steps from the regime side could lead to an easing of broad-based economic sanctions, spurring growth and diversification in Burma's economy. We could dangle World Bank and IMF technical assistance and, with progress, loan packages. We could consider revisiting current restrictions on the ability of UNDP to work with low-level GOB entities. With sufficient progress, the sanctions specifically targeted at the regime and its cronies could be on offer, too.

-- We should make clear our desire to provide increased humanitarian assistance (outside of regime channels) to help meet crying needs. Unstated but true: such aid would subvert the regime both by building civil-society capacity and illustrating to the grassroots in Burma that the outside world helps and the regime doesn't. We should seek regime cooperation on the Rohingya issue, offering USG assistance to build livelihood opportunities in Northern Rakine State.

-- We could formally open a PD outreach center in Mandalay, utilizing the U.S. consulate that closed in 1980. Countrywide, we could offer increased educational exchanges. Those who studied in the U.S. even many years ago retain fond memories and view the U.S. in a positive light. Access to quality education is priority one for Burma's citizens.

-- We could consider accepting the country name "Myanmar." "Burma" is a vestige of colonial times that actually elevates the Bamar majority over other ethnic groups. Practically everyone inside uses the term Myanmar, as do all countries in Southeast Asia, though the NLD has thus far refused to bend on that topic.

-- We could accede to the regime request to upgrade their COM in Washington from CDA to Ambassador.

Comment

¶19. (S) Some propose that getting started at a better relationship is more important than insisting on difficult-to-achieve democracy and human-rights outcomes in the near term. In that view, U.S. regional and global interests should drive Burma policy. Others remain adamant that to demand less than the right democratic and human-rights outcomes would be to sacrifice the efforts of Nobel-laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and others in a wishful expediency. Any walk down the road of dialogue will require great patience and thoughtful judgments about how much to offer and how much to demand. The regime's inclination toward engagement is surely driven by its own perceived interests (reducing sanctions, achieving respect, modulating China's influence). However, the senior generals likely see rapid movement to the West's democracy and human-rights goals as downright dangerous. Still, one never knows how flexible the other side will be until negotiations begin. Also, the looming 2010 elections may be an opportunity. The process will be flawed, but an aspect may be stage one of a transition toward a next set of (mostly military) leaders. U.S.-Burmese dialogue now could signal to that next generation what a positive relationship with the U.S. might offer, planting seeds for future change.

¶20. (S) Given the likelihood that major successes on the democracy front will be slow in coming, we believe it important for the U.S. to undertake a long-term effort to build the groundwork for future democracy. Per our MSP, we want to follow up on post-cyclone aid with a broader humanitarian-assistance endeavor. If properly designed, such assistance builds the basic capacity of people at the grassroots to survive and to think beyond mere subsistence to political goals. Such aid is subversive more directly as well: recipients understand who helps them (international donors) and who doesn't (the regime). In this context, "humanitarian" aid can encompass health, non-state education, micro-finance, and other local initiatives, all with civil-society capacity-building components. The U.S. should also focus on elements within the regime that show genuine interest in our regional priorities. The units involved in counter-narcotics, anti-trafficking, and infectious-disease efforts would be good places to start. They have shown willingness to act appropriately, but they need training. Aside from contributing to our regional goals, assisting such elements might encourage some broader re-thinking of regime attitudes toward the Western world.

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